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AUTHOR Hedstrom, Lloyd J.; Hedstrom, Betty J.
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ABSTRACT

As the number of married college students increases, there is growing interest in the impact of graduate study on marital adjustment. In an attempt to determine whether studying psychology and marriage counseling would ameliorate the stressful effects of graduate study on spouses, 72 psychology graduate students who were specializing in Marriage, Family, and Child Counseling completed the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) and answered questions soliciting demographic information and information on the stressful aspects of graduate level study on personal relationships. The results indicated that the more units of study completed in the program, the lower the dyadic adjustment score. Despite this negative correlation, 72 percent of the students indicated that psychology courses they had taken had a positive impact on their dyadic relationship. Most subjects (68 percent) considered time constraints and pressures to be the most stressful aspects of graduate studies. These findings suggest that graduate programs do have a moderately adverse effect on dyadic personal relationships. Comparison of these results to similar studies using different sample populations suggest that training in marriage and family counseling did not offset the effects of stress. (NRB)

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Lloyd J. Hedstrom
Betty J. Hedstrom
Pepperdine University

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ACADEMIC STRESS AND MARITAL ADJUSTMENT IN A GRADUATE PSYCHOLOGY PROGRAM

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There is growing interest in the impact of graduate study on marital adjustment, as the number of married college students increases. Bloom conceptualized the university as a stress inducing system (Bloom, 1975). Hibbs has noted that graduate study may be hazardous to marriages, as a result of observations at a law school (Hibbs, 1982). He observed that there is an unusually high divorce rate for graduate and professional school students. Many divorces occur shortly after the completion of graduate school. Higgins studied married doctoral students in Schools of Education in three universities in the Los Angeles area, and found a significant difference in dyadic adjustment between students in the early phases of the program, and those who had completed the terminal examinations, with higher scores earned by beginning students (Higgins, 1983).

Various authors implicate time pressures and constraints, which reduce time for communication and sharing, adversely affecting the quality of intimacy in the relationship, reduce time for shared leisure activities, reduce time spent with children, and, coupled with worry and fatigue, may have a negative impact on the sexual relationship (Taifoori, 1979). Other factors may include financial difficulties, and a growing apart as one partner grows intellectually. Higgins found that the more schooling the spouse had, the higher the dyadic adjustment of the student.

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This study was basically an attempt to replicate Higgins' findings in a M.A. level program in General Psychology, using Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale. Most of the students in this program (70%) complete a specialization in Marriage, Family and Child Counseling, in addition to the M.A. in Psychology requirements, meeting the academic standards set by the Board of Behavioral Science Examiners for the MFCC license in California. This raised the interesting question as to whether studying Psychology and marriage counseling would ameliorate the stressful effects of graduate study noted above. There was also interest in comparing the dyadic adjustment of Psychology students with those studied in other samples using the DAS.

Method. Approximately one-third of the classes (15) offered were personally visited and married volunteers were solicited to take the DAS and fill out a demographic questionnaire, which included an open ended question asking for the most stressful aspect of graduate level study on personal relationships. About one-half of the students (89) in the classes agreed to participate and took the necessary forms. Classes were chosen to cover those taken early, mid-way, and late in the program.

Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale is a carefully constructed 32 item questionnaire with a possible range of 0 to 151 points (Spanier, 1976). It correlates highly with the most widely used measure of marital adjustment, the Locke-Wallace scale, and each item discriminated between a large sample of married and divorced subjects in Pennsylvania. It yields a total score and four subscale scores derived by factor analysis. The subscales are named Consensus, Satisfaction, Cohesion and Affectional

Expression.

80% of the tests and questionnaires were returned, i.e., 72. The DAS was computer scored, the number of units completed in the program was ascertained, and various statistical analyses were performed.

Results. Higgins' findings with Education doctoral students were essentially confirmed for this sample of Psychology master's level students. The Pearson R correlation between the total DAS score and the number of units taken was -.308 (P = <.005). The more units completed in the program, the lower the dyadic adjustment score. The correlation with the Dyadic Consensus scale alone was slightly higher at -.317 (P = <.005). A significant correlation was also found with the Dyadic Satisfaction subscale with R at -.287 (P = <.005). The correlations with Dyadic Cohesion, -.051, and Affectional Expression, -.136, were not significant.

Higgins found significantly lower DAS scores for female doctoral students as contrasted with male doctoral students. This was decidedly not the case for Psychology students, as the average DAS scores were very similar (females = 110.3, males = 109.3). A large number of students did not have any children (47.9%). It might be theorized that there would be less stress for childless couples as opposed to those who had children. However, average scores for the childless versus those who had children were very similar, yielding insignificant "t" tests.

Paradoxically, 72% of the Psychology students indicated that psychology courses they had taken had a positive impact on their

dyadic relationship, despite the negative correlation noted above. A survey of the responses to the open ended question about the most stressful aspect of graduate studies found the word "time" occurring with remarkable frequency. Fully 68% of the sample indicated that time constraints and pressures were the major problem.

There were many general references to lack of time spent with mate, conflict between recreational and study time, time away from the family, lack of quality time together, less "play" time together, and problems in scheduling for work, study, and family responsibilities. A distant second were comments about academic pressures producing irritability with adverse dyadic effects, financial pressures, inability to share psychological interests with one's mate because of unshared interests, insight into motivations for mate selection, and an inability to explore feelings more with the spouse.

A comparison of the scores earned by Spanier's married normative group in Pennsylvania, used for item analysis and selection, and our Psychology graduate students indicates that they are discrete populations (Spanier, 1976). The Pennsylvania sample was comprised primarily of working and middle class families who worked at several industrial or corporate firms. So there are obvious socioeconomic and geographic differences involved, in addition to educational aspirations.

Table 1. Comparison of DAS Scores of Psychology Graduate Students and Pennsylvania Married Group

	Psychology Students			Pennsylvania Married Group				
DAS Score	Mean	N	SD	Mean	N	SD	t	P
Total:	109.7	72	13.9	114.8	218	17.8	2.49	<.05
Consensus:	48.1	72	6.6	57.9	218	8.5	10.12	<.01
Satisfaction:	36.9	72	5.9	40.5	218	7.2	4.27	<.01
Cohesion:	16.3	72	3.2	13.4	218	4.2	6.05	<.01
Affection:	8.4	72	2.0	9.0	218	2.3	2.14	<.05

Although the graduate students score lower on the total score and each of the individual subscales with the exception of Cohesion, a similar comparative analysis with Spanier's divorced group finds them significantly higher on every score.

Table 2. Comparison of DAS Scores of Psychology Graduate Students and Pennsylvania Divorced Group

	Psychology Students			Pennsylvania Divorced Group				
DAS Score	Mean	N	SD	Mean	N	SD	t	P
Total:	109.7	72	13.9	70.7	94	23.8	13.21	<.01
Consensus:	48.1	72	6.6	41.1	94	11.1	5.08	<.01
Satisfaction:	36.9	72	5.9	22.2	94	10.3	11.60	<.01
Cohesion:	16.3	72	3.2	8.0	94	4.9	13.09	<.01
Affection:	8.4	72	2.0	5.1	94	2.8	8.77	<.01

Clearly the married graduate students rank far above the recent Pennsylvania divorced groups.

To place the total scores of the Psychology graduate students in further perspective, their total mean score, 109.7, is not much below a sample of married teachers with the M.A. degree, 110.6, though it appears significantly lower than the total sample of Higgins' Education doctoral students at 117.6.

Discussion. An interesting question stemming from this research is whether institutions engaging in the education of mental health professionals should concern themselves with the impact of their training on the mental health and dyadic adjustment of their students. Judging from the literature, such concerns on any formal basis appear to be the exception rather than the rule. Higgins takes the position that institutions should not only concern themselves with the effect of academic stressors, but should take steps to ameliorate adverse reactions. Hibbs reports an elective seminar in Pepperdine Law School for married students which focuses on the stress of law school, as well as the practice of law, and teaches strategies to cope with this stress (Hibbs, 1982).

The findings of this study and the Higgins study, suggest that graduate programs do have a moderately adverse effect, although the data is cross sectional rather than longitudinal. Comments by the Psychology students suggest that time constraints and pressures may be the predominant stressor, though academic pressures, financial pressures, and diverging interests appear to play a role with some. A reassuring finding is that Dyadic Cohesion scores are virtually identical for those in the early and late stages of the program, while Dyadic Consensus and Satisfaction scores are significantly lower for those who are

finishing. This suggests that basic commitment to the marriage may not be suffering, though disagreements and dissatisfactions appear to increase. This finding is not quite consistent with the statistic that marriages are more apt to fail after graduate school (Hibbs, 1982).

Are the marriages of graduate Psychology students primarily specializing in marriage counseling more poorly adjusted than those of other groups? So far the answer would appear to be, perhaps a little. It does not appear that the training in counseling offset the effects of the stress. Spanier's Pennsylvania sample show significantly higher scores with the exception of Dyadic Cohesion, where the Psychology students score significantly higher. Higgins doctoral Education students earn an average score of 117.6 to 109.7 for the Psychology students (Higgins, 1983). However, the Psychology group scores far above Spanier's divorced sample.

While we have focused upon the married graduate student as a recipient of stress, a fruitful line for future research might be in the direction suggested by Bloom's concept of the university as a stress inducing system. Clearly, there are stressors impinging on the various personnel and subsystems that comprise the university. The student is only one component part of the system. A more enlightened understanding of student stress might result from more thorough knowledge of the sources and effects of stress in the entire system.

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